

WALTER AND IRMGARD BRILL: SURVIVAL IN TIMES OF TERROR



before 1938

This book is for _____

to treasure and pass on.

Also read by:

WALTER AND IRMGARD BRILL: SURVIVAL IN TIMES OF TERROR

Written specifically for Irmgard and Walter Brill's grandchildren,
great grandchildren and great great grandchildren, and so on into
the distant future.

by Winston J. Brill, Redmond, Washington, U.S.A.
February 2019

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Walter and Irmgard, 1959



Here is a story of my parents' escape from Nazi Germany. If they hadn't survived, you would not be reading this. You wouldn't have existed. You'll see how they survived when most Jews, living in Germany in 1938, were murdered.

Throughout history, prejudice leading to suffering and even mass murder constantly emerges and many targets of evil are caught unaware and/or unprepared. If you happen to find yourself the object of rampant prejudice against your beliefs, skin color, status, etc., it may be too late to protect yourself. But through luck, skills and fortitude—as with the case of my parents—some are able to get through what seem to be insurmountable barriers. Will you be able to fulfill your dreams if you face evil prejudice? By appreciating how Walter and Irmgard overcame tremendous odds, perhaps you will gain an advantage if you, or your family, are put in bad situations. Maybe some of my parents' character traits, allowing them to survive unimaginable horrors, have been passed down to you.

Besides recording this piece of family history for Irmgard and Walter's descendants, putting this story together has been an emotional personal experience. I rarely asked about, and wasn't that interested in, what my parents went through during the war. They never volunteered to discuss the terror and how they survived Nazi persecution of Jews. That my parents didn't want to talk about their horrible times, it turns out, is not unusual. Historians who have contacted family members of Nazi atrocity survivors, learned that most who experienced unbelievable horrors didn't want to re-live such memories.

It was only in the past two years (as I am writing this, I am 79 years old) that my interest was piqued and that was due to Dr. Clare Weissenberg contacting me about a fascinating and very well-organized website (kitchenercamp.co.uk) she was establishing about Kitchener Camp (this website will shortly be housed at the Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust, www.wienerlibrary.co.uk). Both her father and mine survived the Nazi regime because of that British refugee camp. My interest was *really*

stimulated when Dr. Weissenberg emailed that a magazine about Kitchener Camp had a photo of me as a newborn being held by my parents. She also pointed out that photo was featured in two books. I had no idea! Also, she told me something else I never knew: the origin of my middle name, Jonas (you'll learn about that later). I just knew it was to honor someone who was involved in my parents' early months in England, but I didn't know anything about the person.



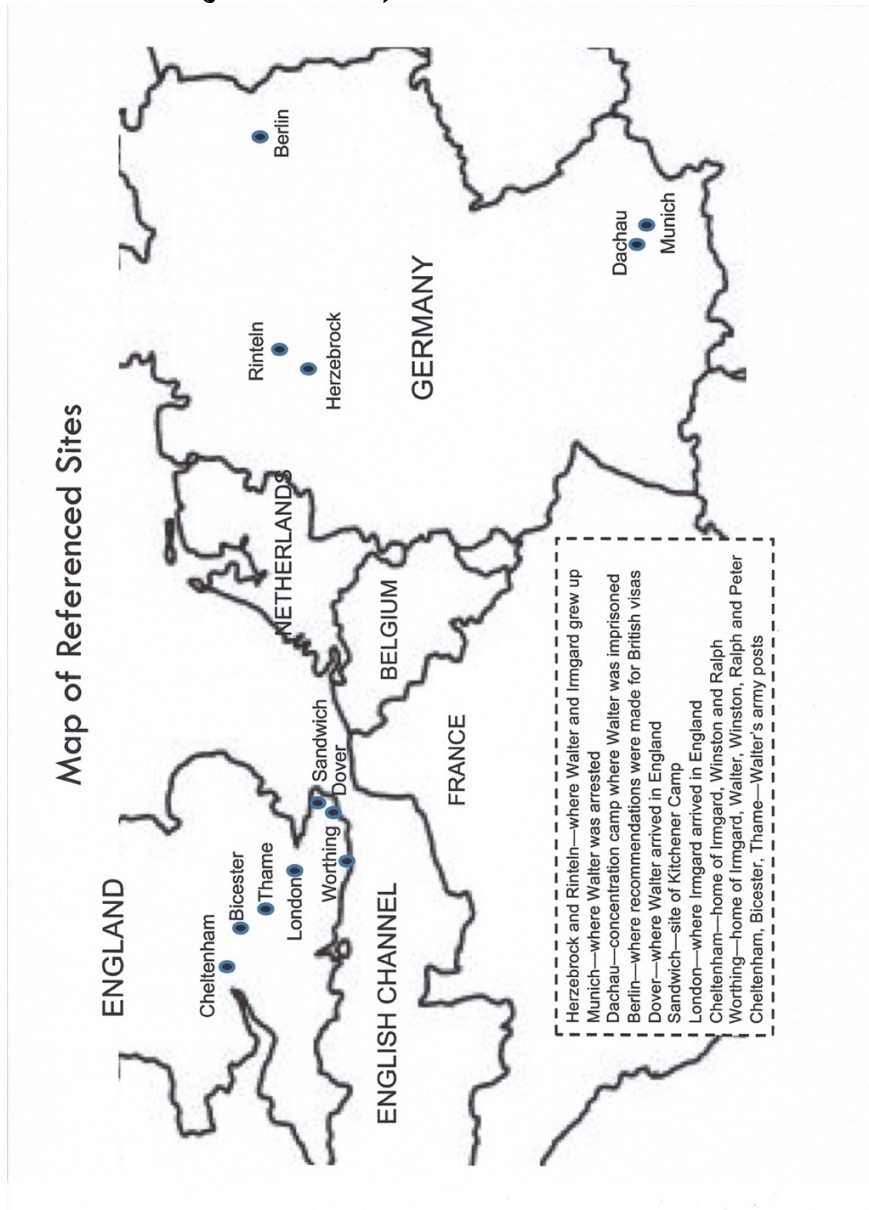
July 1939. Irmgard and Walter with baby Winston at Kitchener Camp. From *Some Victims of the Nazi Terror: The Reward of the Salvors*.

The information here was collected from many sources. Some material came from my father's June 1971 one-and-a-half-hour interview recorded by the New York-based Leo Baeck Institute (lbi.org). Leo Baeck appears later in this document. I only learned about this interview—hearing Walter's *actual* voice—in 2015, twenty-six years after he passed away! Walter had boxes of photos, letters, and documents in a living-room cabinet. Again, I knew nothing about this when he was alive. After Walter died, my brother, Ralph, was going through Walter's house and came across this material, some of which I am including here. Walter's British army documents were quite useful. Information from the World Jewish Relief was invaluable. Some important facts came from Cheltenham, Worthing and Sandwich town managers in England.

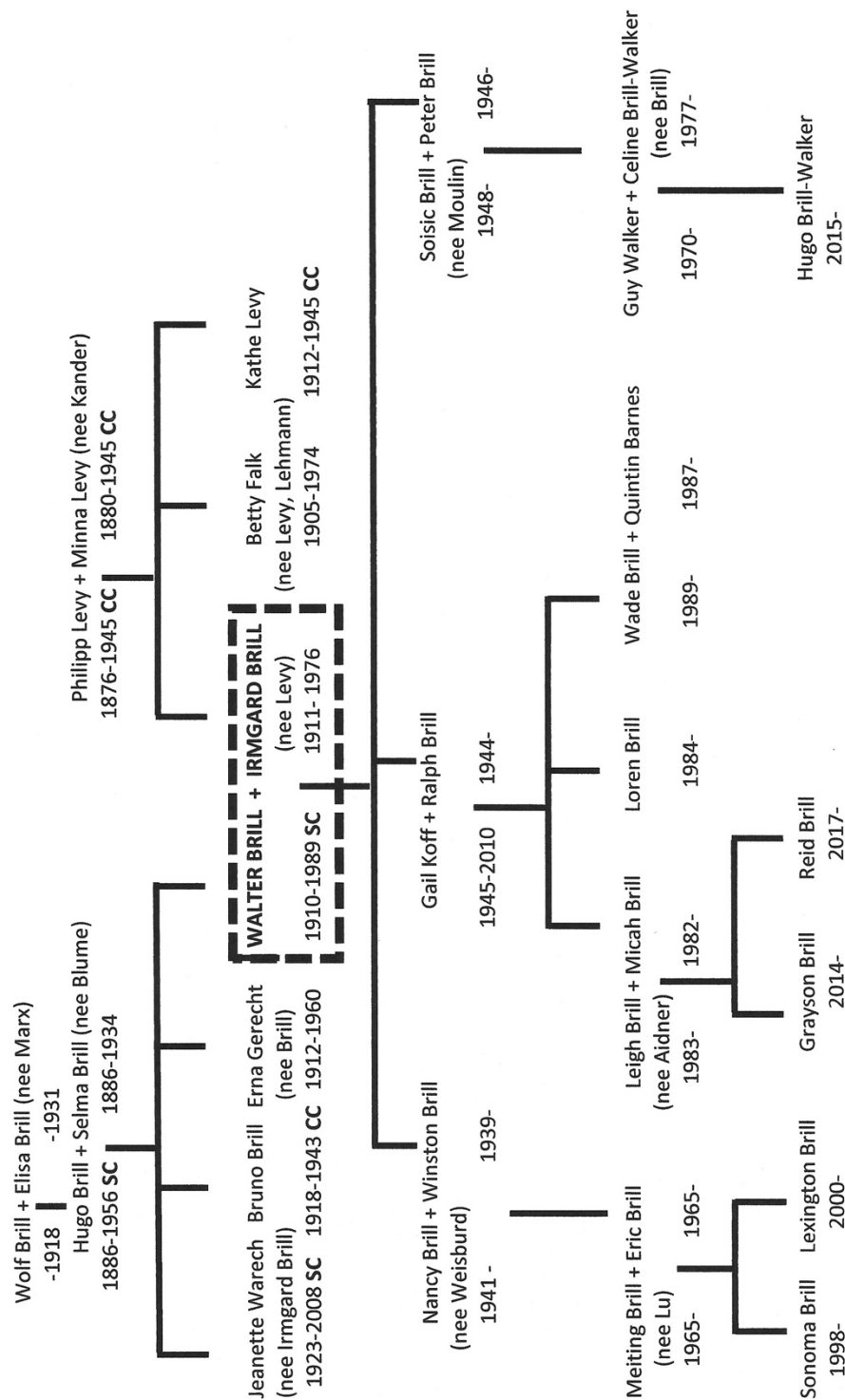
Other material came from Dr. Weissenberg's Kitchener Camp website and from the very informative book, "Four Thousand Lives: The Rescue of German Jewish Men to Britain, 1939" (one of two books with the above photo of me) by historian, Dr. Clare Ungerson. Dr. Ungerson generously reviewed an earlier version of this document. The Wiener Library was a resource. Both of my brothers, Ralph and Peter, as well as a nephew, Micah, a niece, Celine, and Peter's wife, Soisic, supplied useful information. I especially acknowledge the many very helpful suggestions from my lovely wife, Nancy.

I tried to make this as accurate as possible. Still, there are quite a few gaps in my late parents' wartime history. Readers who are interested in their own background should ask questions of their elders—before it is too late. If only I had asked Irmgard and Walter....

You can find more photos, documents and letters about the Brill family on kitchenercamp.co.uk (to be included in the Wiener Library website). Ralph, my middle brother, provided additional family photos and documents to the Jewish Museum Berlin (jmberlin.de).



CC = murdered by Nazis **SC** = concentration camp survivor



Anti-Semitism: Discrimination or hostility against Jews.

Anti-Semitism has existed for over two thousand years, with many examples of Jewish persecution and mass executions. Rationalizations for anti-Semitism include “Jews being killers of Jesus” and that “Jews want to dominate the world.” Jews also had different religious rituals and didn’t celebrate popular holidays such as Christmas and Easter. This led to Jews being scapegoats. Many Jews lived in homogeneous communities; therefore, they were easy to identify. Germany lost World War I (1914-1918) and was in severe economic depression with inflation running rampant. Of course, “that was the fault of Jews.” Adolph Hitler, head of the Nazi party and Chancellor of Germany, pursued the idea that Jews are an inferior race that should not be allowed to taint the superior Germans, the “Aryan race.” This led to the Holocaust and demise of six million European Jews.

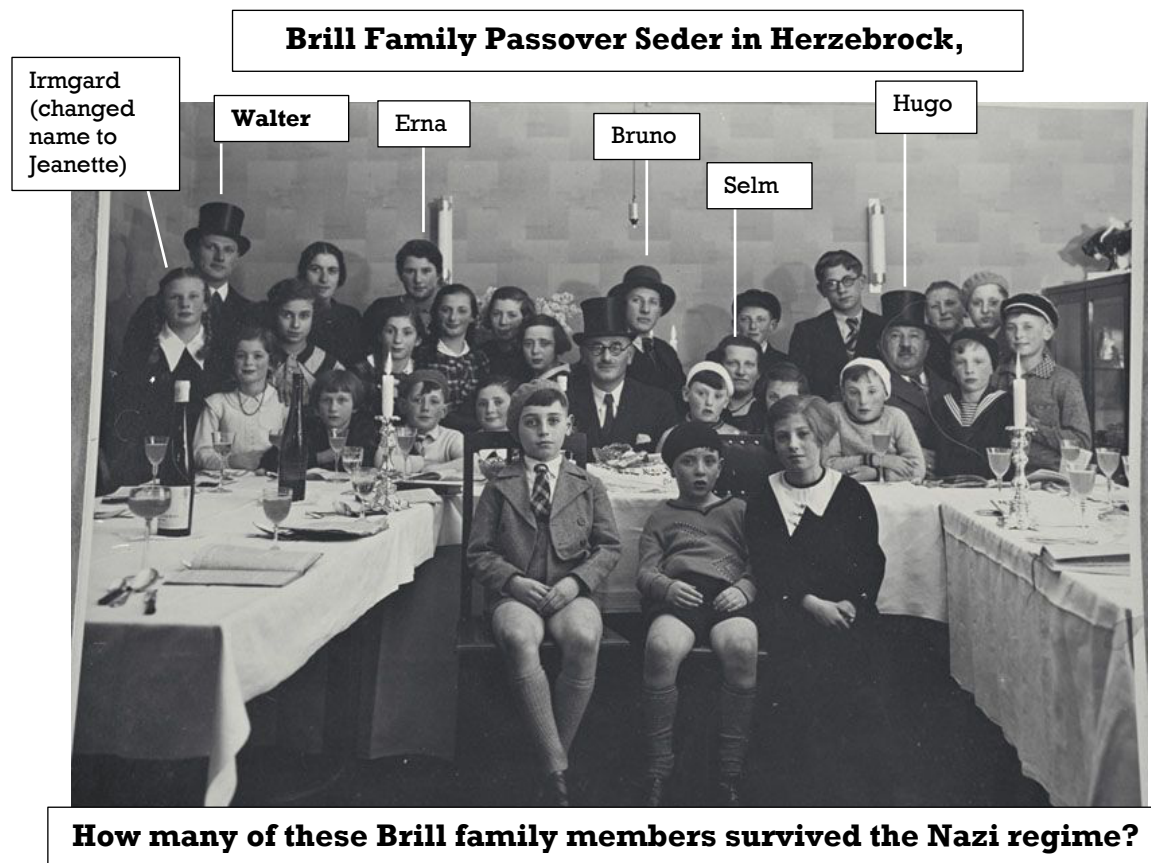
Many firms could, with approval of the government, print their own money (notgeld) in 1923. This ten-billion-mark note was not sufficient to purchase even a loaf of bread. That’s inflation! Notice the company, Venherm & Brill. Venherm was Hugo’s (Walter’s father) business partner.



Note: Dates represent day(s) that are documented. For instance, a day/month/year referencing a place where the family dwelled just means I found a reference for that date-place connection. Usually, I wasn't able to find the start and end dates of residence.

September 13, 1910 Walter Brill was born in Herzebrock, Germany. His family had been living in Herzebrock for at least three generations. Walter's mother, Selma, died of tuberculosis in 1934. His father, Hugo, fought for Germany in World War I. Hugo owned three businesses, a furniture factory, meat-canning factory and slaughterhouse so he was relatively wealthy. Hugo survived the Holocaust.

Walter had one brother, Bruno, and two sisters, Irmgard (same first name as my mother, but changed it later to Jeanette) and Erna. Bruno was murdered in a concentration camp. Irmgard (not my mother) survived Auschwitz concentration camp and had a prisoner's number permanently tattooed on her arm. After the war, she lived with her husband in France. Erna moved to England with her husband in 1938.



April 8, 1911

Irmgard Levy was born in Rinteln, Germany.

Her parents, Philipp and Minna owned two shoe stores, one in Rinteln. Irmgard had an older sister, Betty, and younger sister, Kathe.



Three Levy sisters: (left to right) Betty, Irmgard, Kathe, before 1938



Irmgard Levy with parents, Philipp and Minna, before 1938

**Irmgard Levy,
before 1938**

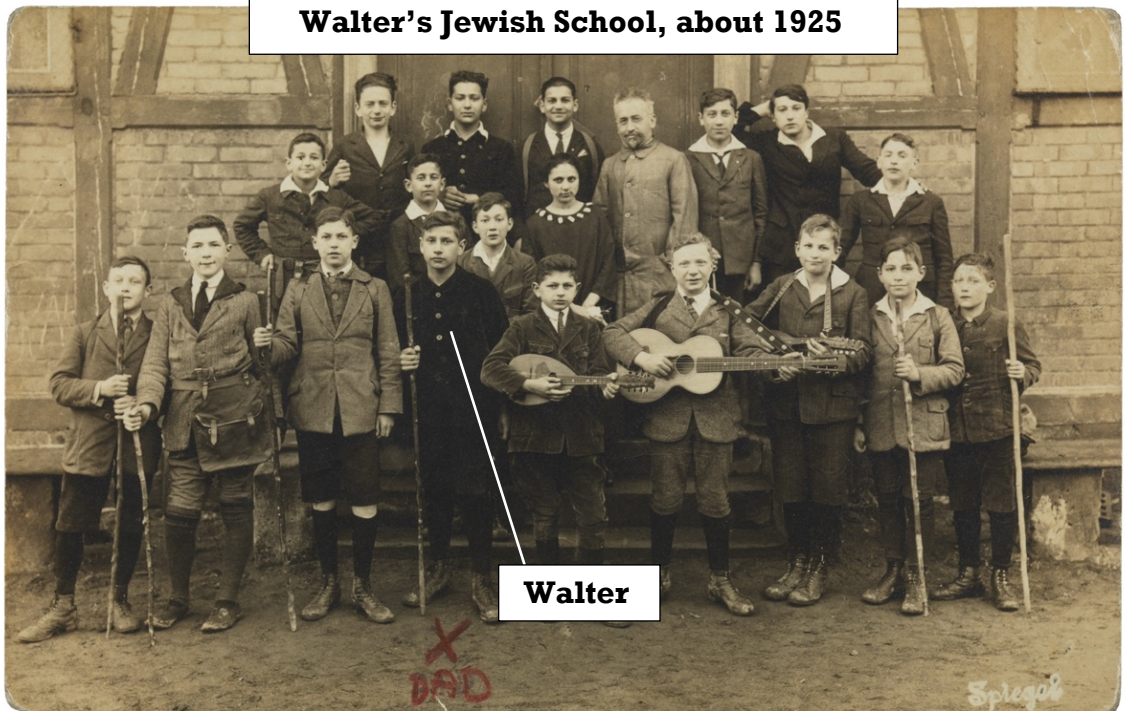


**Irmgard Levy,
before 1938**

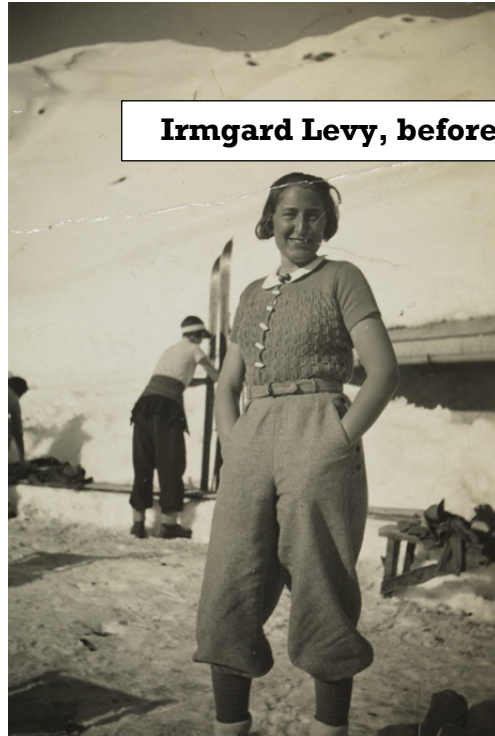


Irmgard and Walter grew up in a country with pervasive prejudice against Jews. Because of Walter's bad experience with anti-Semitic teachers in a public grade school close to his home, he was sent to a Jewish school some distance away. Most of Walter's and Irmgard's friends were Jewish, so they were able to insulate themselves from those who didn't like Jews. Both seemed to enjoy comfortable and happy lives.

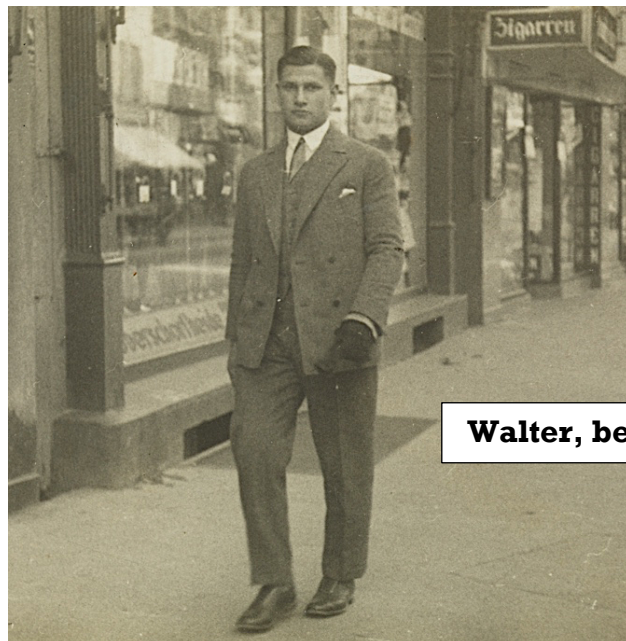
Walter's Jewish School, about 1925



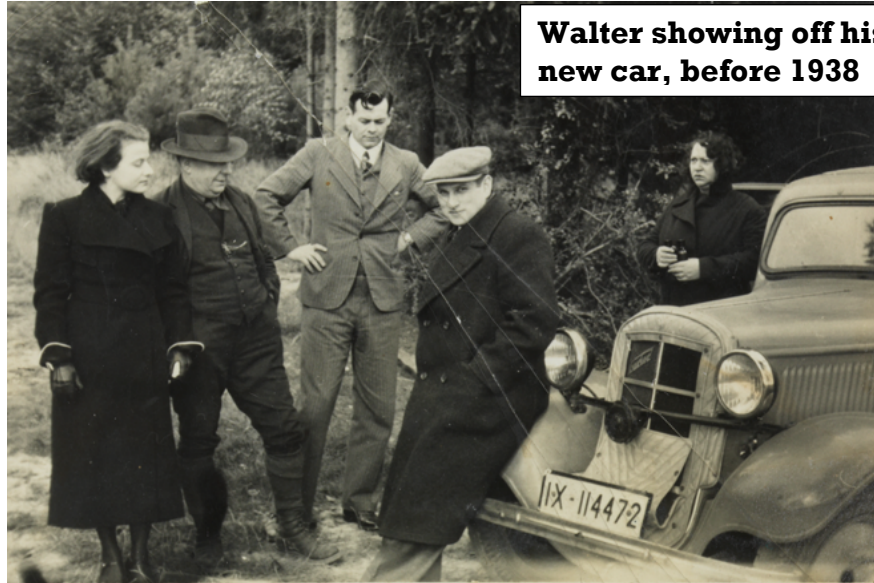
Walter



Irmgard Levy, before 1938

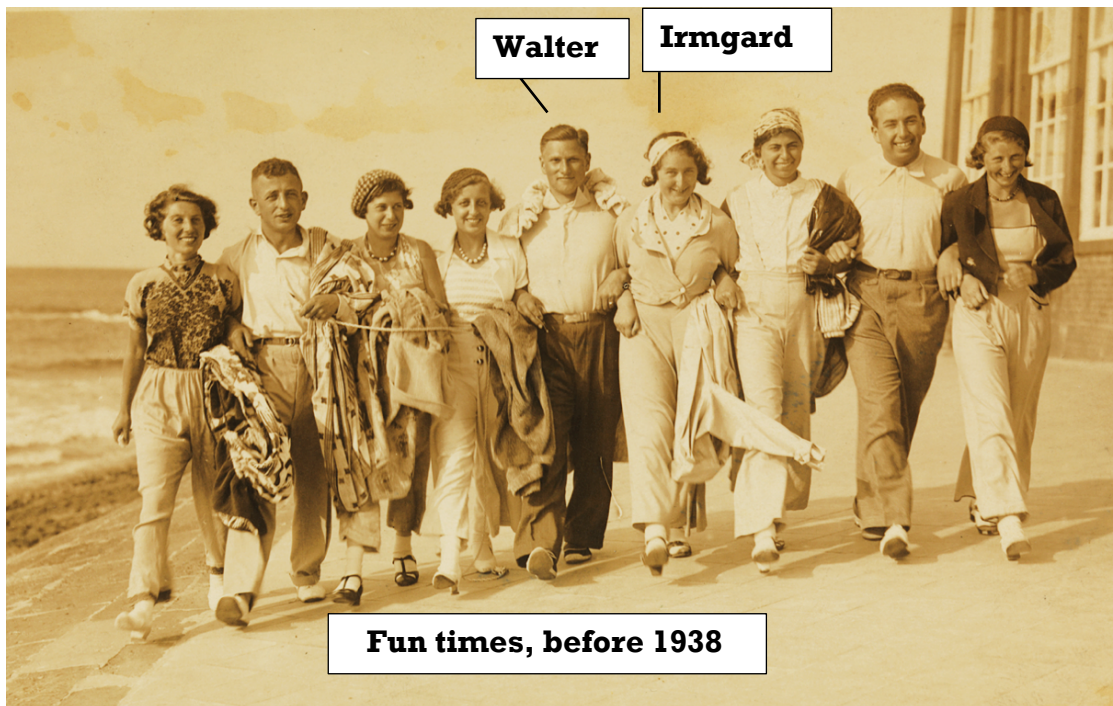


Walter, before 1938



**Walter showing off his
new car, before 1938**

Walter had an uncle who lived in Rinteln. During a visit to this uncle (before 1930), he met Irmgard Levy who he romanced for many years before finally marrying her.



Fun times, before 1938



With friends, before 1938

Walter

Irmgard



Irmgard and Walter, before 1938

April 1, 1933

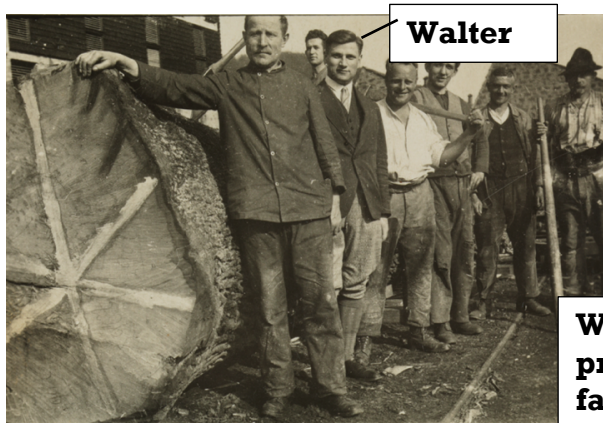
The German government encouraged the public to boycott Jewish businesses.

The Levy shoe store's windows were smeared with words such as "Jew pig." People were discouraged by the Nazis from shopping in the store.

In 1933 there were more than 500,000 Jews in Germany. As Nazi-provoked anti-Semitic activities increased, about 300,000 Jews emigrated to other countries. They were the smart ones and had the funds to leave. In 1938, there were about 200,000 Jews left in Germany. Of those, 170,000 were slaughtered by the Nazis. Over 60 million people were killed (civilians and soldiers on both sides) during World War II (1939-1945).

Irmgard and Walter remained in Germany until the spring of 1939. Why didn't they leave in 1938 or earlier? Perhaps it was due to the scary unknowns of living in a new country. If they left Germany, they would have had to leave behind family, money and property. They would have had to learn a new language and assimilate to a different culture. So, for them, remaining in a bad situation seemed preferable to leaving for new lives. They might have merely rationalized, incorrectly as it turned out, that the Nazi regime would shortly collapse, and life would get back to normal. Many other European Jews remained in their countries for a variety of reasons, including having no money (in many cases, the Nazis had taken their money and valuables) or foreign sponsorship, only to be killed by the Germans.

Anyway, in the early 1930's Walter was financially secure. He initially wanted to get into the import-export business, but his father had other plans. He told (asked?) Walter to take over the furniture factory. Walter saw the furniture factory as his future and decided to learn the basics of cabinet making. He attended a woodworking school and got an advanced degree in furniture making. He then led the factory's furniture-making team. This, you'll see, was critical to his survival, but he had no idea of the real value of his woodworking skills until a few years later.



Walter's woodworking group, preparing wood for the furniture factory, before 1938

February 1937 The Nazis arrested both Walter and his father, Hugo, for being Jewish. They were locked up in a local prison for six months.

August 1937 When they were released from prison, they learned that the furniture company had been taken out of their hands, leaving the factory to be solely managed by their Christian partner.

This was a common practice at the time—forcibly removing Jews from managing companies. Walter was unable to find employment. (After the war, the Christian partner gave Hugo back his 50% interest. In the 1970's Hugo's descendants were able to buy 100% of the furniture company. It no longer exists.)

Walter's fiancée, Irmgard Levy, saw a newspaper advertisement for a woodworker to instruct Jewish boys to become cabinetmakers. The school was in Munich. He applied for the position and was invited by Leopold Kuh (who will be important later) to meet in Berlin for an interview. Walter got the job, teaching boys during the day and then an evening course for adults. He instructed students how to build and repair furniture, apply surface finishes, and refinish old, damaged surfaces. The purpose of this training was to give Jews skills they could use after emigrating from Germany. People with such skills were more valuable to a host country; therefore, more likely to receive visas.

August 14, 1938 After at least nine years of dating, Irmgard and Walter married in a Munich synagogue. What a time to get married!

Irmgard and Walter's marriage certificate,





Avi Gerecht, Erna Gerecht (nee Brill), Hugo Brill, Jeanette Brill, Bruno Brill (deported to a concentration camp November 1938 and killed in 1943), Irmgard Brill (nee Levy), Walter Brill.

October 24, 1938 Thank goodness for the Council for German Jewry (now World Jewish Relief), a group of influential British Jews who were concerned about the fate of Jews under the Nazi regime. The Council suggested that the British government support and fund a refugee camp in England. The camp was to be a safe haven for German, Austrian and Czech Jews. However, the British government had no interest in paying for this plan. But the Council continued to pressure the government and this persistence was key to establishing Kitchener Camp.

November 9-10, 1938 Kristallnacht (night of broken glass), promoted by the Nazi government, involved citizens and police vandalizing Jewish businesses, synagogues, homes, schools and cemeteries. 30,000 Jewish men were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. What terror German Jews must have experienced!

Kristallnacht, November 1938 Notice the smiles and indifference to the smashed windows!



November 10-14, 1938

The Nazis tried to arrest all Jewish men in Munich. Walter and Irmgard hid for three days in the house of a co-teacher at Walter's school. Then the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, announced there would be no more arrests. Walter and Irmgard left the hiding place for home, celebrating that they escaped arrest.

November 17, 1938

However, a few days after this celebration, Walter was once again arrested, and this time imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp. He knew it was going to be a terrible experience since he likely had heard the ditty, commonly repeated since 1935, translated as "Dear God, make me dumb, that I may not to Dachau come."

Walter arrived in Dachau with a group of other prisoners, they were forced to do a certain number of pushups and those who failed were shot on the spot. All Jews had to wear yellow badges to identify them from other prisoners. Walter was in a one-room cell shared with about forty prisoners.

The Nazis did not arrest women at that time. This was prior to the Nazi extermination program where men, women and children perished in gas chambers and their bodies incinerated in specially built ovens. This was before prisoners, including children, had to participate in horrendous "medical experiments." Over the next few years, tens of thousands of Jews were executed or died from starvation and disease just in Dachau, with millions of European Jews and other "non-desirables" slaughtered in the many other Nazi-run concentration camps.

Walter witnessed the degradation, suffering and deaths of fellow prisoners. They were forced to stand at attention outside, in the winter, clad only in underwear. The choice of whom to torture or kill was, at that time, up to individual guards, many of whom were SS (Heinrich Himmler's terror agency) trainees. Some prisoners gave up and committed suicide. Later, the camps were more formally managed with top-down orders. Walter had no idea whether he would see Irmgard again, or even survive.

Dachau concentration camp



December 1, 1938 The German government announced that it planned to rid the country of all Jews.

An efficient way to reach that goal was to permit Jews to leave Germany. But it was difficult to leave since Jews had to pay a special tax and have their belongings, homes and businesses confiscated. Most importantly, a visa from an accepting country was required.

Most countries, including England and the U.S., gave out very few visas at this time. Visas went mainly to those who could convince the authorities that they had sponsors and could immediately support themselves in the new country. Other than the British Protectorate of Palestine (now Israel) and the Dominican Republic, countries did not want a sudden influx of penniless Jews to become part of the population. Even Palestine, under British control, eventually lowered the number of refugees they accepted.

December 12, 1938 After learning about Kristallnacht, the London-based Council for German Jewry became even more desperate to get Britain to save hundreds of thousands of Jews imprisoned or about to be imprisoned, and likely killed, in the various concentration camps (not just Dachau). The Council understood that evacuating all these people to England would be impossible, so they aimed for a pragmatic number.

The Council tried to get two rescues going. The first for children, known as Kindertransports, who were sent to English families. The children's parents remained behind under Nazi occupation. The second rescue was of men in concentration camps, the Kitchener Camp rescue.

January 1, 1939 The Nazi government ordered that all passports belonging to Jews have a large "J" (Jude) on the first page. To further humiliate the Jews, all Jewish men were to be named "Israel" and women "Sarah." The following picture is Walter's passport dated March 24, 1939 when he applied to leave Germany for England.

Walter's passport



Pink marker with "J" for Jude (Jew)

"Israel" as first part of Walter's name

January 3, 1939 The British government finally gave permission for the Council for Germany Jewry to establish a camp for male refugees, ages 17 to 45, on the condition that they leave England within a year after arrival. The decision to select only men was based on the opinion that men had greater potential to be valuable to a country that would take Jews. Also, Jewish women were relatively safe in Germany as they weren't yet imprisoned in concentration camps. Other conditions were that Britain would not fund the program, refugees were not to apply for British citizenship and had to work to maintain the camp for no salary. The British government would not play a managing role.

The Council for German Jewry would have liked to have 30,000 immigrants entering England as long as they left the country within a year. But, because of limited resources, they could only aim for 5,000. They hoped that, within a few months, those 5,000 would move out of the country to be replaced with new immigrants. The Council needed non-governmental funding to establish a site for the refugees and solicited donations from British and American Jews and Jewish organizations to help those people leave Germany, and other occupied countries, for England.

January 5, 1939 Kitchener Camp, located in the small medieval town of Sandwich, was formed by renting an unused World War I British army camp.

Most buildings were decrepit and had to be rebuilt. Kitchener Camp could only handle up to 5,000 people. Over the next nine months, about 4,000 actually arrived. Various English and U.S. companies donated materials such as nails, soap, bunk beds

and stoves. Donations also included cigarettes and chocolates. Many Sandwich residents helped out with materials, labor, entertainment and courses in English. The refugees were to be given lessons in agriculture, carpentry, etc. so they might be better prepared for acceptance by whichever country eventually would grant them a visa out of England.



Kitchener Camp, 1939



The camp was primarily a means to rescue Jewish concentration camp prisoners. The burden for selecting which few of the many desperate incarcerated German Jews were to receive temporary English visas and become residents of Kitchener Camp went to a committee of Jews in Berlin, the Reichsvereinigung (Reich Association of Jews in Germany), under control of the Nazi government. What responsibility—making decisions about which

few would survive and leaving behind the majority who would likely perish! These Reichsvereinigung members, led by Rabbi Leo Baeck, were eventually sent to concentration camps where most died.

Choice for selection to leave a concentration camp for safe haven was based, to a large extent, on the potential of an individual to contribute to the building, running and maintenance of Kitchener Camp. Carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, shoe repairers, dentists and physicians were the kinds of people the camp would require.

Before being imprisoned in Dachau, Walter applied to the Reichsvereinigung to leave Germany. This application was through a Munich synagogue. But now, as a prisoner, it seemed that leaving Germany would be impossible. However, in its objective to rid the country of Jews, the German government allowed prisoners to be released from Dachau if they had proof that another country would accept them and that they would leave Germany within a few days after release. Now, prisoners waited anxiously, hoping their names would be announced to be among those lucky few selected by the Reichsvereinigung allowed to leave Dachau, and Germany.

January 30, 1939 Hitler states that his European war will eliminate Jews around the world.

March 1939 Fortunately, Walter was chosen, by the Reichsvereinigung, to leave Dachau for Kitchener Camp. Finally, he could apply for a visa to leave Germany! However, even though he had no money, he was required to pay a "leave tax" to Germany. He got his father to pay that tax (about 10,000 marks equal to today's US\$3,500).

As prisoners were released, they were ordered to tell people that Dachau was not a bad place. The Germans did not want the world to learn of their cruelty. The implied (or stated?) threat was that relatives remaining in Germany would especially suffer if the Nazis learned that the true story of imprisonment was told.

Irmgard was unable to join him as she was of no obvious benefit to rebuilding Kitchener Camp and had the additional burden of being six months pregnant with me. (Walter's father, Hugo, eventually was arrested but escaped and hid during the war in Belgium's forests and then in France. After the war, he returned to Herzebrock where he lived for the rest of his life.)

Leopold Kuh, who previously hired Walter to instruct students in woodworking, left Germany and was in charge of training at Kitchener. Perhaps Kuh played a role in getting Walter to be selected by the Reichsvereinigung to leave Dachau for residency at Kitchener Camp. Walter's

carpentry skills were a clear asset to the task of rebuilding Kitchener. Walter had unique experience both leading people (in his father's furniture factory) and instructing people (in Munich). Those skills were key to his survival.

April 1, 1939 Walter finally received a visa, through the London-based Council for German Jewry, to travel to the United Kingdom. His passport states, "Leave to land is hereby granted at Dover on condition that the holder proceeds forthwith to Richborough refugee camp, registers at once with the police and remains at the camp until he emigrates." Kitchener Camp was sometimes called Richborough Camp because it was part of the World War II series of camps surrounding the town of Richborough.

April 3, 1939 Walter was one of forty Jewish prisoners released from Dachau, who took a train ride through Germany and into Belgium (they were able to get visas to enter Belgium). They then caught a ferry to Dover, close to Sandwich. He landed, with a small suitcase and 10 marks (equivalent to \$4), in Dover. What must have been going through his mind, not knowing what his future would be like and not knowing the fate of his pregnant wife. Would he ever see her, or other family members, again?

He became a resident of Kitchener Camp, joining between 300 and 400 Jews who had previously arrived from German, Austrian and Czechoslovakian concentration camps. Over the next few months, the population of the camp increased to approximately 3,000. Some were able to get visas out of England to leave for other countries. These people were replaced with new arrivals.

Soon after arriving at Kitchener Camp, Walter was assigned as master cabinetmaker to manage carpenters building barracks for the new residents. In this new country, Walter and others finally found themselves in a friendly environment, something they hadn't experienced in years. Some of his fellow arrivals could not acclimate to this sudden freedom and became unstable.

April/May 1939 Walter stated, in his Leo Baeck interview, that he and his carpenters worked six days a week from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. He did, however, find time late at night to write notes to Irmgard, who was still in Germany. Did she receive them? Would they ever see each other again? What about that child Irmgard was carrying? How frightening the unknown future must have been to both of them!

Walter had 132 men working for him and felt the pressure to finish as many barracks as quickly as possible because, for every barrack completed, 72 more men could be released from concentration camps, leave Nazi control and reside, temporarily, in Kitchener.

Once a week, each Kitchener resident was given six pence (less than today's 50 U.S. cents), a few cigarettes, stamps and an orange. Walter, who didn't smoke, sold his cigarettes earning another penny or two. Residents were kept busy with work, lessons, entertainment and sports. But reminders of their concentration camp experiences included the fact that Kitchener Camp was encircled by barbed wire and there were strict rules, including curfews.

The mental pressures on these men—from their concentration camp experiences to the unknowns of family members—was enormous. Some men became unhinged and had to be taken to an asylum. Jonas May, the camp director, was in contact with the Berlin-based Reichsvereinigung. Therefore, Kitchener men constantly begged Mr. May, to somehow induce the Reichsvereinigung to release their family members who were still in Germany.

What Irmgard was doing, who supported her, and where she was living during the time Walter was in Kitchener remain questions that I have, so far, been unable to answer. Perhaps she was with her parents in Rinteln, or maybe she remained in Munich.

It is quite possible that camp director Jonas May swayed the Reichsvereinigung to allow Irmgard's emigration to England. Maybe he especially appreciated Walter's contribution to camp reconstruction. Perhaps Irmgard was able to obtain a British domestic service visa, but who would hire a woman about to have a baby? Maybe some generous English person just wanted to save her life. I have hints that someone with the last name of Mullen played a role in saving my mother (and me).

June 11, 1939 Walter received a surprise telegram from Irmgard, "Arriving at Croydon." She landed at Croydon, then a military airport in London. Almost all Jews remaining in Germany were slaughtered over the next few years.

After reading the telegram, Walter needed to get to London, but didn't have sufficient money for transportation. Luckily, a man who was visiting Kitchener lived in London. Walter asked the man if he could drive him to the airport to meet Irmgard. Walter finally saw his wife at 11 p.m. The little cash they had between them was used to get a taxi to take them to an inexpensive hotel. The taxi driver, upon hearing their situation, wouldn't let them pay.

The London-based Council for German Jewry most likely played a key role organizing her trip to England. She was pregnant with me and her due date was June 11, the date of the flight!

I so wish I could learn the details of her escape. Unfortunately, the Council for German Jewry, now known as World Jewish Relief, years ago destroyed many records in order to retrieve space for new material. Among those records are many pertaining to Irmgard.

June 12, 1939 In the morning, Walter contacted the Council for German Jewry. The Council generously funded their stay at London's Shelbourne Hotel. He also received a bit of pocket cash from the Council.

June 13 or 14, 1939 Irmgard woke up in the hotel and said, "I think the baby will be born." Walter called a phone number provided by the Council and an ambulance arrived to take her to the hospital.

June 16, 1939 Winston Brill (that's me) was born. Irmgard wanted a "typical" English name for her son and thought Winston was appropriate because that was a frequent name in the newspapers as Winston Churchill was a prominent politician (later he became Prime Minister). Winston was not a common English name. If my mother had known better, I probably would have been named "John" or "Cedric." At that time, Irmgard knew very little English. The Council paid for Irmgard's hospitalization and her stay after I was born.

Shortly after June 16, 1939 Jonas May, Director of Kitchener Camp, and likely key to Irmgard obtaining a British visa to permit escape from Germany, consented to become my godfather. My name is Winston Jonas Brill in honor of him. A local newspaper even wrote about the origin of my middle name.

Alice Stern, my mother's cousin who was living in England, delivered a note and a white baby blanket to Irmgard. It was made by Irmgard's mother (my grandmother) and that was the last contact Irmgard had with her mother.



**9-week-old Winston
with grandmother
Levy's blanket, 1939**

July 4, 1939 Address of Irmgard/Winston: 4 Westgate Street, Hackney, London. Walter lived in a Kitchener Camp barrack.

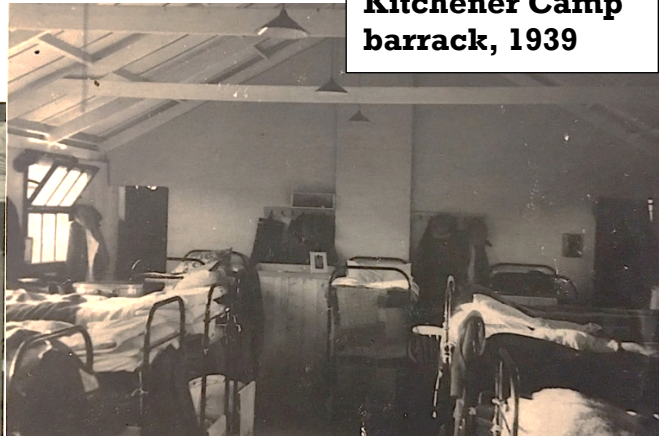
September 1, 1939 World War II begins with Germany invading Poland.

September 3, 1939 Britain and France declare war on Germany.

Walter (right) with pal on bunk bed in Kitchener Camp barrack, 1939



Kitchener Camp barrack, 1939



October 10, 1939 Remember, one criterion for accepting Jewish refugees was that they were to leave England within a year. But, with the war, it became even more difficult for these people to find a country to accept them. Also, the Council for German Jewry was running out of money. The Council for German Jewry had a possible solution and suggested to the British government that Kitchener men have an option to join the army to help fight against Germany. Fortunately, the government agreed as any war aid was welcome.

The Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps was already an established unit where British men with learning disabilities and mental health issues were given tasks to help the war effort. These men were not given guns. Refugees seemed a 'natural' for the Pioneer Corps since they were not to have guns. There was suspicion that some Kitchener Camp individuals might be allied with the Germans, so it seemed logical that they were not allowed to have firearms. Before Kitchener men were permitted to apply to the Corps, they had to go through an interrogation to weed out possible German spies. The Pioneer Corps was tasked with non-weapon-involved duties: building bridges, digging latrines, building bunks etc.

October 17, 1939 In recognition for helping Britain's defenses, Kitchener men would be permitted to apply for British citizenship if they served in the army for seven years.

November 14, 1939 Many Kitchener Camp residents applied for service in the Pioneer Corps. Kitchener then became a training center for these, and other, new soldiers.

November 16, 1939 In the morning, Walter enlisted in the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps. Coincidentally(?) later in the day that Walter enlisted, he received a visa to travel to Australia. But it was too late for Walter to "de-

enlist.” He thought that his Australian visa was purposely held up to be sure he would be part of the Pioneer Corps.

Walter’s rank was sergeant and he was expected to be proficient in English to give orders. That challenge, he said, stimulated him to improve his English. As a soldier, he finally had a salary, most of which went to supporting my mother and myself. He said, after his first pay, that he “felt like a king!”

Irmgard and Winston lived at 5 Delf House, Sandwich. While some wives of Kitchener men actually resided in the camp in a separate fenced-in area, I don’t know if Irmgard lived there with me. Perhaps she did and then moved to Delf House when Walter joined the Pioneer Corps. However, as I remember, my parents told me that “we” lived in Kitchener Camp.

If Irmgard and infant (me) did live in an apartment in town before Walter’s enlistment, she had to pay for it. Perhaps she did this by doing domestic work or maybe a generous citizen provided our room and board.

Neither Irmgard nor Walter had any idea of the fates of their parents, siblings, other relatives and friends remaining in Germany. Imagine what thoughts pressed on their minds.

**Walter in the
Pioneer Corps**



April 2, 1941

Walter was posted to 251 Company.

June 7, 1941

251 Company moved to Cheltenham for construction of road blocks, defense works and electric pylons.

December 31, 1941

Walter was involved in cutting and cable laying.

251 Company, March 1942



March 28, 1942 Irmgard's parents and her younger sister, Kathe, were deported to a concentration camp in a former Jewish horticultural school near Hannover, Germany.

March 31, 1942 Irmgard's parents and Kathe were deported to Warsaw, where they were all killed (between 1942 and 1945).

February 25, 1943 251 Company moved to Thame.

June 23, 1943 251 Company ceased to be described as an 'alien company' and began conversion to a British company.

July 4, 1943 251 Company moved to Arncott Camp, Bicester for camp construction. Walter, in his spare time, built wooden toys for me (our son, Eric, exhibits them on a shelf in his house).



October 28, 1943 Walter was posted to 339 Company.

November 26, 1943 Irmgard/Winston address: 1 Evesham Road, Cheltenham. We lived with other women in one room.



1944 We moved to an apartment at 5 Pittville Lawn, Cheltenham. Irmgard earned money making leather gloves and toy stuffed animals at home.

A woman living on the same floor saw me in the hall and beckoned me, a five-year-old, to come into her apartment. She asked if I would like something delicious, opened a jar and gave me a sample. It tasted OK. However, the woman later told my mother that she fed me pigs' foot, obviously knowing that Jews aren't supposed to eat pork. I don't know how, or if, my mother responded.

Another incident was when Irmgard was shelling peas in our kitchen. She had the door to the apartment open because it was a hot day. That same woman walked into the kitchen and with her hand swiped the table, spilling the peas onto the floor. Then she walked out. My mother said this woman didn't like Jews. I thought she was an actual witch and was afraid of her. We experienced anti-Semitism even in the country to which my parents fled to avoid such hatred!

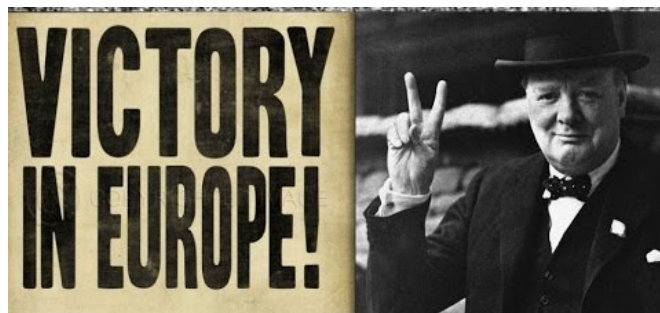
I remember being woken up once in a while by air-raid sirens. We lived on the top floor and had to retreat to the basement. We heard aircraft and bombs exploding. A nearby bomb blast, or plane debris, cracked our ceiling. On mornings after such raids, sometimes we would find destroyed buildings in the neighborhood.

While I am sure my mother was terrified during these middle-of-the-night incidents, I actually enjoyed them since I could play in the basement with other youngsters who lived in the building. I wasn't afraid as I, a five-year-old, saw all of this as normalcy. That normalcy included having a soldier father who I saw infrequently and having miserable rationed food that my mother made me eat, even not letting me go to school until I finished breakfast or lunch. We had very little food, most of which was strictly rationed.

November 24, 1944 Ralph David Brill was born in Cheltenham. I rode with my father on his bicycle to see my mother and my newborn brother before she came home. She had a red dress and I remember saying, "You are so beautiful!"

May 8, 1945 Victory in Europe (V-E Day).

Irmgard/Winston/Ralph were living at 4 Chatham Road, Worthing, Sussex. My mother heard, on the radio, the war was finally over. She cried and ran into the street with all the other neighborhood women and they were hugging each other. I didn't appreciate the meaning of that day.



Prime Minister Winston Churchill with his V for "victory."

Because of rationing, we never had candies during the war, or for several years afterwards. When children saw an American soldier, they went up to him and asked, "Any gum, chum?" Frequently, we got a stick of gum or a piece of candy. What a treat!

Walter and Irmgard did not know the fates of many of their relatives, most of whom were killed in concentration camps. My father registered the names of these people with the Council for German Jewry (World Jewish Relief). The hope was that such registration would help these relatives, wherever they were, to be identified—alive or dead.

October 9, 1945 Walter was stationed in Woburn Sands with #9 Group, 339 Company, Pioneer Corps with rank of War Substantive/Sergeant. He finally received his Order Release stating that his "military conduct was

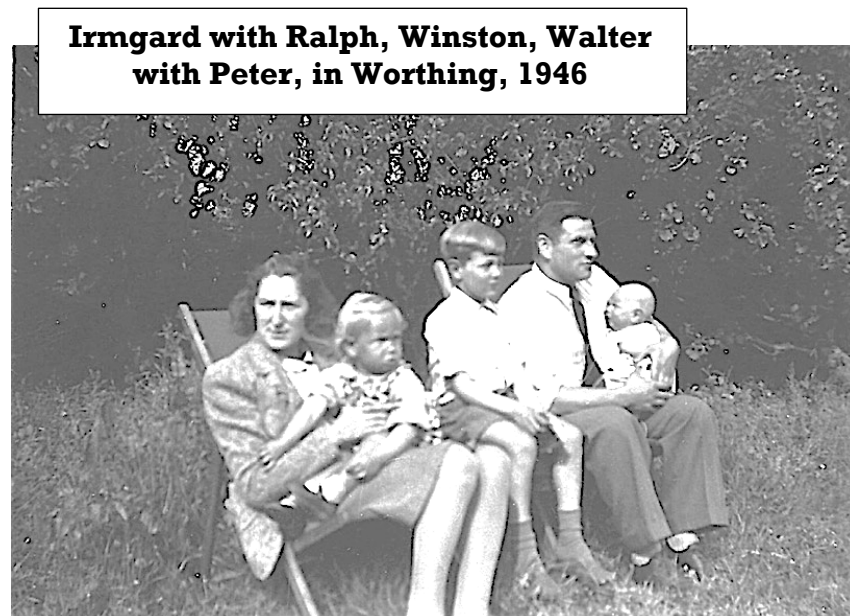
exemplary” and that he was “Honest, sober, very intelligent, hardworking, trustworthy. As a senior N.C.O. has for the past six years been employed on maintenance and camp construction being able to work unaided from blue prints.” Not a bad review!

Now that he was a civilian, he made a living going door to door asking if people could use his furniture-repairing skills. He rode his bicycle, loaded with tools, to his customers. We were quite poor, but he saved as much money as possible. My parents, for the first time, could actually plan a future for the family.

December 6, 1945 Walter was released to Class ‘Z’ Royal Army Reserve until February 9, 1954.

Walter was released to Class ‘T’ Royal Army Reserve until September 13, 1955 when he “attained the age of 45.”

March 5, 1946 Peter Beno Brill was born in Worthing. His middle name was to honor Walter’s younger brother who perished in a concentration camp. Irmgard thought “Bruno” was too “German,” so she came up with “Beno.”



January 22, 1947 Walter and Irmgard became naturalized British citizens. Winston, Ralph and Peter automatically became citizens since they were born in England.

1946-1949 I attended Lyndhurst Road state primary school in Worthing as its only Jewish student.

Scheduled on Friday afternoons were readings from the New Testament (Jews don't believe in the New Testament). I wasn't bothered by those stories, but when my mother found out, she went to the school and got permission for me to go home on Friday afternoons. Of course, this only increased prejudice against me. One time I was playing marbles in the school playground during lunch break and, when I missed, I said, "Christ!" The teacher on playground duty heard that and hit the back of my hands with a stick. Other boys frequently said "Christ" when they were upset, but no one cared. Here's another example of anti-Semitism—in a place that was supposed to be an escape from such attitudes.

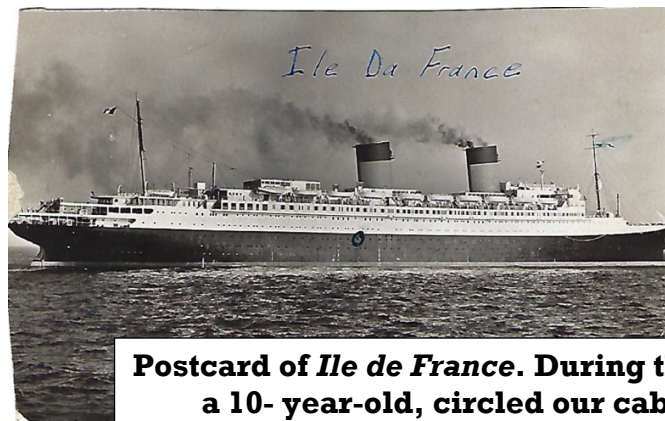
Many houses in Worthing had been bombed and when I passed a destroyed building, I wanted to explore the ruins; however, there were signs and tape around those sites, keeping people away.

We lived only a few blocks from the Atlantic Ocean, which was frequently closed off with barbed wire due to mines that drifted onto the sand. When it was safe, I loved going to the beach and would spend hours observing tide pools. I think that interest stimulated me, many years later, to pursue biology as a career.

Irmgard's older sister, Betty, who left Germany with her husband, lived in Newark, New Jersey and sponsored my parents' American visas. Several of Walter's cousins, who lived in America, encouraged him to move there. Walter and Irmgard believed there was a greater chance in America that the three boys would get a college education and thus become successful.

My father stated that another reason for leaving England was the food quality. It took years, after the war, to bring agriculture and food distribution back to normal in Europe. Also, Walter felt there was less anti-Semitism in America than in England. He was concerned that Russians would invade England, as they now were ruling part of Germany. Walter and Irmgard did not want their sons to experience another war.

November 10, 1949 Walter/Irmgard/Winston/Ralph/Peter left England via S.S. *Ile de France*. The Atlantic Ocean was stormy and the only one who could keep food in his stomach was Walter. The trip was supposed to take five days, but it actually took seven.



November 17, 1949 The family arrived in New York, and was welcomed at the pier by Irmgard's sister, Betty. I was upset that I hadn't been woken up to see the Statue of Liberty as the ship passed by!

In my ten years living in England, I had only seen one black person, so it was a total surprise when I saw many during the taxi ride. Until then, I thought black people only lived in Africa. Also, the many skyscrapers we passed were sights the family had never before experienced.

Winter, 1949 Walter, Irmgard and sons settled in the first floor of a small house in Newark, New Jersey. Through a local agency, Walter purchased inexpensive furniture. Betty, my aunt, and her husband ran a small kosher delicatessen. My first "job" was waiting tables there and entertaining customers with my English accent. I enjoyed receiving cash tips and snacking on the world's best food (my opinion, then and now).

During that first week in America I saw, for the first time, a telephone, refrigerator and television! Boys wore short pants in England, even during the winter. I begged my mother to get me a pair of long pants so I would fit in and become like my classmates. Those used pants were acquired from my American cousin. It took many years of hard work to get rid of my English accent.

1950- The trip to America expended most of the money Walter earned in England. Irmgard was a housewife with three children and had no income. Walter initially worked for several furniture stores, repairing damaged new furniture. He didn't enjoy being managed by others, so Walter became self-employed, refinishing and repairing furniture. The stores he worked for recommended Walter's services to their customers.

He built his business with individuals who heard of him through satisfied customers. Walter guaranteed that no trace of a scratch, dent, stain or cigarette burn would be detectable after he was finished with it. He would use fine brushes to achieve details of the natural grain with his collection of dozens of jars each holding a different colored stain. He really was an artist in his trade.

Walter worked from early morning until late at night, including weekends, to make enough money to support the five of us. His workshop was our living room and the apartment smelled of solvents. His hands were always stained. Walter finally saved enough money to rent a second-floor workshop in an industrial area of Newark. He then moved his solvents and tools out of the house. Now we had an actual living room! Walter's reputation grew, and he even worked on antique furniture in the New Jersey governor's mansion.

We eventually moved to our own house in a Jewish neighborhood of Newark. The public high school I attended had mostly Jewish students and most of my friends were Jewish. After high school, each of the Brill boys assimilated with more diverse groups. I rarely saw acts of anti-Semitism.

As a youth, Walter was brought up to follow Jewish rituals and he even attended a Jewish high school; however, his experiences in Dachau led him to no longer believe in God. On Yom Kippur, Judaism's highest holy day, Irmgard would go to a synagogue in Newark (the only day she would attend), while Walter took a long walk in the woods. None of Irmgard and Walter's children and five grandchildren are especially active in synagogues or other Jewish organizations. Several aren't at all religious.



Family in Newark, New Jersey, 1950

Winston

Ralph

Peter

My parents received a lump-sum payment from Germany as restitution. Walter invested that money. The amount was far less than what was taken from them. Can there ever be a monetary value on murdered parents and siblings?

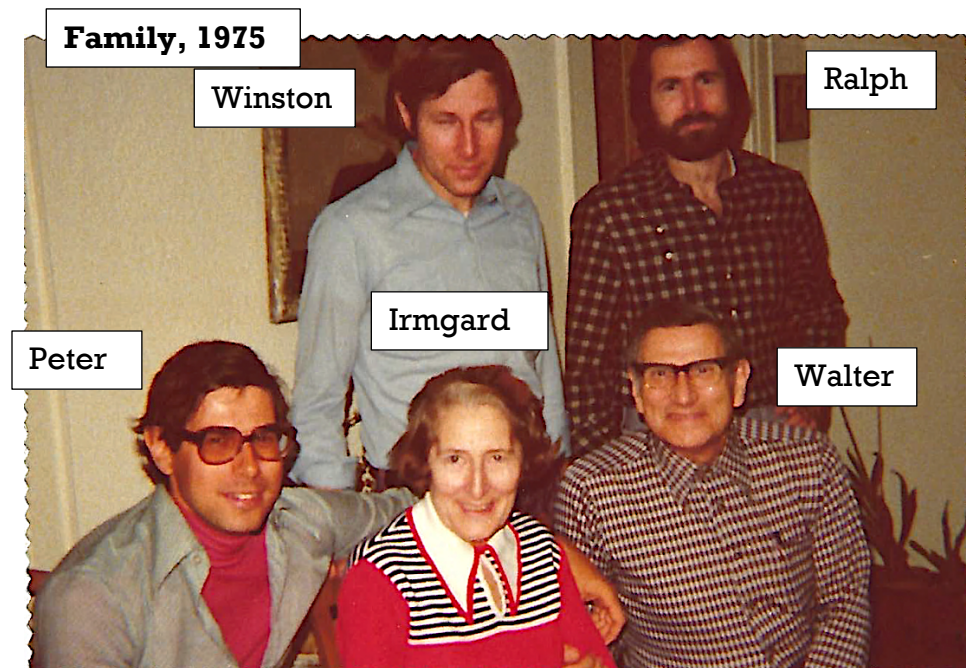
Through all their tribulations, Walter and Irmgard considered themselves to be very successful. Irmgard was proud that she was president of a local Jewish organization, Unity Club. They had quite a few friends, most of them German Jews. Couples came to our house to play bridge and other games. In his retirement, Walter kept busy tending the garden and following his investments. Irmgard enjoyed knitting sweaters for the family.

Neither Walter nor Irmgard went to college and they didn't live a showy life, certainly nothing like the "high life" they enjoyed before 1938. They felt their "success" was mainly due to having three college-educated children, two who studied architecture and a third who majored in microbiology. That's what they boasted about—their sons! Walter was very proud that he built a successful business "all by himself." He instilled a sense of independence in his sons.

Recognizing the Brill brothers' American citizenship in the *Newark News* (1954). Ralph, Winston, Peter (left to right)



NEW AMERICANS—United States citizenship brings happy smiles to Ralph, Winston and Peter Brill (l. to r.), Newark residents born in England of German refugee parents.



September 15, 1975

Irmgard passed away.



February 7, 1989

Walter passed away.

Here's a twist, that I just learned about, to the Kitchener Camp/Brill story. While at Kitchener, Walter was friendly with a Julius Czarlinski, who also fled Germany. The Pioneer Corps recommended that enlistees change their names to more "British" names for protection in case of capture if the Germans invaded. Julius changed his name to John Carter. John's wife, Ruth, spent the war hiding out in Germany and suffered horrific experiences. After the war, both families remained in England since the husbands were in the Pioneer Corps. The Carters and Brills independently moved to New Jersey, USA and became good friends. Long after Irmgard and John passed away, Ruth and Walter became a non-married couple. If Walter hadn't been friends with Julius (John) at Kitchener in 1939, he wouldn't have enjoyed Ruth's companionship during his last eight years.

Walter lectured his sons, "What you can do with your brain and hands, no one can ever take away from you." That certainly was key to our parents' survival.

In Walter's Leo Baeck Institute interview is this quote: "as long as there are two different languages and there are two different religions, and there are different colors of the skin, there will *never* be peace in this world." That's quite a pessimistic statement. His solution was "that people intermix or intermarry." However, that quote does not match what I observed and heard regarding my parent's attitudes towards African Americans. That attitude, unfortunately, was a common one in those days. I note that the cycle of prejudice continued, even among those who had suffered the brunt of others' hatreds.

It is unfortunate that very little information is available about Irmgard. The common mind-set of those times was that most married women were "merely" housewives and mothers. Also, she was not outspoken and was mostly quiet about how she felt. I would have loved to listen or read about her thoughts and experiences before and during the war. What did she do and how did she feel in the months before she escaped to England? I can't imagine what she was thinking as she flew to London ready to give birth, not able to speak English and entering an unknown and very different life. Unfortunately, I never asked.

Irmgard had to be a courageous and determined woman. With very little money, she raised a child during the war, had a soldier husband rarely around, no nearby friends or relatives and she had a thick German accent.

After the war, while Walter worked hard to earn money, Irmgard raised three little boys. What strength and fortitude it must have taken to do this—and do it right! She never complained and rarely “told” us what to do. She *expected* the boys to figure out what to do.

As I wrote this bit of history, I looked through many photographs of my parents before 1938. They certainly looked happy and care-free. But I don’t ever remember them as particularly happy and care-free; they always seemed burdened. Who wouldn’t be forever burdened having close family members killed by enthusiastic murderers doing their jobs in horrific ways? What went through Irmgard and Walter’s lost loved ones’ minds in their last years, months, weeks, hours, minutes and seconds in concentration camps? Can one ever dismiss such thoughts?

Recently there has been an increase in public demonstrations by Nazi groups, not just in the U.S., but around the world. Are these people grandchildren of Nazi supporters during World War II, or are they newly sprouted? Will this ever end?

You, the reader, are living in times that likely are far different than the time in which I am writing this. Hopefully, you are healthy, content and not burdened by others’ prejudices. But—just in case—here is some advice (that’s a key role of an old man, giving advice):

- Never be too complacent, as infrequent evil incidents have the potential to become ways of life.
 - Be aware of political activities and possible outcomes.
 - If circumstances are bad, *act* to change them or even *act* to leave.
 - If you are caught up in a terrible environment, don’t give up; use all your wits to survive.
 - Have the resolve to start a new life, from scratch if necessary.
 - Be aware of your own prejudices as well as the prejudices of others.
 - When an opportunity arises, especially an unexpected one, give it serious thought.
 - Cultivate dependable friends.
 - Work hard to improve your skills.
 - Realize the power of love.
-

Thank you to the many individuals who politicked, funded, organized and wrote about the history of Kitchener Camp!!!

I estimate that those heroes who formed Kitchener Camp and rescued 4,000 desperate Jews in 1939 are responsible for about 50,000 people who are alive in 2019. Imagine the number of people in the year 2100 who will be alive because an ancestor had been rescued by Kitchener Camp!

Thank you, Irmgard and Walter, for my life, the lives of my brothers, and the lives of our children and grandchildren!!!

And thank you, Irmgard and Walter's descendants, who continue to forward my parents' genes!!!

With you, the Brill family goes on. Pass this down to your descendants. So, what has happened since? Comments, your stories, updates on the family tree and photos belong in the following pages and/or other documents.

And the Story Continues...

